FREEDOM & THE LAITY

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WITHOUT PERSONAL CONVICTION there is no true appreciation of beauty. What makes the Collect for Peace (Prayer Book, page 17) so beautiful, as an illustration, is the conviction carried by its simple assertion that the service of God "is perfect freedom." The more one reflects upon that statement, the more it comes home that there really is no other freedom worthy of the name.

In almost frenzied manner we are currently endeavoring to persuade ourselves that freedom can be secured by all sorts of political and military devices. Aid to underdeveloped countries, stimulation of the gross national product, fantastic military weapons, unlimited expenditure to land a man on the moon—all are justified and acclaimed in freedom's name. All these and other governmental outlays may be necessary. I am not questioning them here. Nevertheless, they are all at best very indirect agencies of freedom. Measures of this nature were far from Paul's mind when he exhorted the Galatians to: "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free."

This the clergy have been urging us to do for a long, long time. But it is doubtful whether many laymen, in our own or other Christian countries, at present adequately realize the intimate connection between faith and freedom. Advent would seem a most appropriate season for deepening this understanding.

As a matter of historic fact, we owe the entire conception of freedom as a human birthright to the coming of Christ. Until that time "absolutism held unbounded sway," to use the phrase employed by Lord Acton in his study of *Freedom in Antiquity*. Slavery was the universal condition of the great majority of mankind and was nowhere regarded as an improper social order. Even the Greek civilization, at its finest flowering, was based on slavery. It was the same with the Hebrews, to whom we also owe so much. A formal recognition of slavery introduces the long calendar of minute ordinances listed in Exodus 21, 22, and 23.

Freedom means an absence of external coercion. The idea that this is a generally attainable condition, in any society, came slowly because order is the obvious prerequisite. Order is a necessity for co-operative action of any kind, for civilization itself. Freedom is, by comparison, a luxury. Men can live quite comfortably in a condition of slavery. They cannot even exist without the basis of order in their societies.

Therefore, at all times and in every place, governments have necessarily placed the preservation of order ahead of the assumed right of the individual to be free from external restraints. The human instinct may be, indeed often is, to kill an enemy; to rob the stranger; to use one's neighbor despitefully. But once government was organized, even on a primitive scale, the development of law has been to punish and thereby discourage anti-social desires.

Gradually, by that process, the power to coerce has been taken from the individual and

concentrated in the collectivity. In that manner the enslavement of men by private owners has been slowly eliminated. Easily, however, the pendulum can swing to a comparable enslavement by the State. Soviet Russia is a case in point. The subordination to Communist dictatorship there seems scarcely preferable to the private serfdom of a century ago.

One form of authority, however, has always been accepted voluntarily. On innumerable occasions, before and since the time of Spartacus, men have risen in revolt against their individual masters. Frequently, as our own history shows, they have rebelled against a government regarded as tyrannical, seeking to replace it by another more calculated to secure "the Blessings of Liberty."

Subordination to God, on the other hand, throughout recorded history has been regarded as inevitable, appropriate, and desirable. The Church, as a religious institution, has certainly had its share of protestants. But here rebellion has always been viewed as a rising against human mishandling of the organization. Reformation, not overthrow, is the objective.

Thus the Hebrew prophets demanded something more satisfactory than the narrow ritual of their priesthood and thus the last and greatest of these prophets, in highly effective protest, founded the religion which has gradually become more dominant than any other in history. Christianity today is, to be sure, divided into many sects and rent by many schisms. But Christ remains as the Master to whom hundreds of mil-

lions give a voluntary allegiance that is much more unified than differences in the formalities of their worship indicate.

This phenomenon has had the most momentous political consequences, of which all too many of us today seem strangely unaware. From the viewpoint of politics, using the word in its deeper, Aristotelian sense, the importance of Christianity lies in its effective stimulus to self-government. Whoever takes the Sermon on the Mount to heart will have gone a long way towards learning how to govern himself, in spite of temptations and even under exasperating conditions. And it should be apparent that he who governs himself has little need of external government. He is what we call trustworthy; being orderly he may safely be entrusted with freedom.

THE GREAT PROBLEM of politics is how to reconcile the theoretically desirable condition of freedom with the fundamentally essential condition of order. Establishment of Christianity provided the formula whereby this difficult adjustment could be made. The devout Christian *ipso facto* led a law-abiding life. So laws forbidding offenses which he would not in any case commit were, in his case, superfluous. As the number of Christians multiplied, law enforcement, wherever they concentrated, thus became easier. The moral argument for slavery, resting on the assumption that the common man is untrustworthy, lost its validity, the more so because the particular appeal of Christianity was to the oppressed.

Throughout the Roman Empire this situation soon became a political problem of great mag-

nitude. Under the Romans good order prevailed, but to the exclusion of freedom. Christians, demanding a revolutionary form of worship as a right, "gradually formed [says Gibbon] an independent and increasing state in the heart of the Roman empire." This *Civitas Dei*, as Augustine called it, was the first triumphant political alternative to tyranny, as many another dictatorship has discovered since the decline and fall of Rome.

Paul was quick to see that officialdom would resent this undermining of its authority. And his skillful argument was that there is no necessary conflict between the spiritual and the political command. "The powers that be are ordained of God," he flatly asserts in the famous thirteenth chapter of his Epistle to the Romans. "Rulers", he continues, "are not a terror to the good work, but to the evil." This thesis was to cause trouble later, as a seeming justification for the Divine Right of Kings. But it certainly served to assuage the fear of Christianity in the minds of the pagan emperors.

The real reason for their eventual acceptance of Christianity, however, was not so much Paul's assurance as it was habitual Christian performance. And the primitive Christian was not law-abiding in order to placate civil authority, but because under church guidance he had arduously disciplined himself. Having learned self-government, in the literal sense of the phrase, he needed less political government. This became clear during the so-called Dark Ages, when Christian foundations, such as abbeys and monasteries, got along very well without any political controls, eventu-

ally arousing the hostility of Henry VIII for that very reason.

For a long period, throughout what was in all sincerity called Christendom, the hand of the State rested lightly on practising Christians. It is sometimes asserted that this is explained by the difficulties of communication, primitive technology and simplicity of economic organization. These were factors, undoubtedly, but more important was the morality of Christian laymen and the respect commanded by that morality. It is certainly more than coincidence that as this morality declined the modern movement towards strongly nationalistic, centralized government took form. Freedom, always precariously established, is now again menaced by this currently dominant trend.

Fortunately, however, we now know the basic political requirement for the condition of freedom. It has been established by and upon the firm conviction of countless Christian laymen. With this enlargement of spiritual authority it became reasonable to limit that of mundane rulers. In Milton's ringing words:

> *Our liberty is not Caesar's. It is a blessing we have received from God Himself. It is what we are born to. To lay this down at Caesar's feet, which we derive not from him, which we are not beholden to him for, were an unworthy action and a degrading of our very nature. . . . Being therefore peculiarly God's own, that is, truely free, we are consequently to be subjected to Him alone, and cannot, without the great-*

est sacrilege imaginable, be reduced into a condition of slavery to any man, especially to a wicked, unjust, cruel tyrant. . . . Absolute lordship and Christianity are inconsistent.

This thesis that liberty is a human birthright became politically dominant for the first time in seventeenth century England, at a time when our own political institutions were being formed. It is a basically religious assumption, which can be strongly disputed on historical, biological, and sociological grounds. Therefore it made headway slowly, and only among people with centuries of organized Christian experience behind them. For the same reason the concept of liberty will weaken, and eventually disappear, wherever and whenever men place their faith in political rulers rather than in God.

AMERICANS ARE singularly fortunate in having the New Testament as the wellspring of their political thought. On the virgin soil of what is now the United States it was not utopian to plan a governmental system actively conducive to Christian practise. As Governor Bradford wrote in his journal, the motive of those who sailed on the *Mayflower* was their "great hope and inward zeal . . . for propagating and advancing the Gospel of the Kingdom of Christ."

This zeal led directly on to the Declaration that "Men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights," including "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." Whether true or false this could be convincingly asserted only

because a great majority of the colonists had learned self-government along the hard and stony road of Christian practise. It was a representative group of laymen who eleven years later wrote the Constitution, carefully safeguarding the individual against either ecclesiastical or civil domination, and immediately reinforced to that end by the first ten amendments, collectively called the Bill of Rights.

Although influenced by the clergy, it was these laymen who, from their own conviction, dated the Constitution "in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and eighty-seven." And the principal author, James Madison, in urging adoption admitted frankly that the success of this "political experiment" would depend entirely "on mankind's capacity for self-government." De Tocqueville, visiting the young Republic during the Jacksonian era, voiced the same thought more comprehensively: 'The Americans combine the notions of Christianity and of liberty so intimately in their minds that it is impossible to make them conceive the one without the other."

If that is no longer the case, it is not due to any clerical failure. It is because the layman, no matter how conscientious in formal observance, has somehow lost the sense of intimate relationship between the spirit of Christianity and the condition of freedom. We demand the latter without realizing that it has never existed, and cannot exist, in absence of the former. "Either Caesar or anarchy," the Romans said as their great empire fell to pieces from internal decay. Either Christianity or slavery is our choice today.

That the communist leadership realizes this is paradoxically shown by the deep respect it has for Christianity. The Kremlin knows that to achieve its goal the teachings of Christ must first be eliminated as a vital force in human life. The subversion, however, is now very carefully designed, not by open persecution, which so generally defeats its own ends, but by a sedulous promotion of that same sort of religious indifference which has become a pronounced characteristic of American life. If we were not already largely paganized we would realize that to close the missile gap is of less consequence for freedom than it is to widen the gap that separates our nominal Christianity from Communist agnosticism.

To widen this really critical gap is obviously the task of the individual layman. Self-government means precisely that and nobody other than the individual can make it effective in his or her case. When the layman is thus dedicated he will instinctively help the Church, but until he is so dedicated the Church cannot do much for him. Only in the direct service of God can men find freedom. It is a service of volunteers and not of conscripts.

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